The ‘Little Way’

On the Hundredth Birthday of Thérèse of Lisieux, 2 January 1973

by Hans Urs von Balthasar

Digital edition: © Saint John Publications, 2022 | Original: In: *Konradsblatt. Wochenzeitung für das Erzbistum Freiburg* 56/52 (Karlsruhe, 11.xii.1972). | English translation produced for personal scholarly use.

We do not have so many great saints in recent times that we could afford to do without them. Perhaps the objection will be raised that the designation ‘great saint’ fits precisely not the ‘little’ Thérèse with her teaching of the ‘Little Way’, which she herself described, explicitly and with care, as a way for all Christians, and especially for ‘little souls’. Well, we will not dwell on the fact that Thérèse was quite aware of being a ‘great saint’ — that is, one to whom a significant mission in the Church fell; it suffices to note that the ardour of devotion to her throughout the whole world has quite obviously been fanned by the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit, and that the expression ‘great saint’ is best applied to those who are borne to canonisation by the Spirit himself (and not primarily by human interests), as is the case, for example, with the Curé of Ars or Don Bosco.

But already a new objection takes shape: did this little Thérèse not have her hour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? Does she not stand or fall with a settled, perhaps even rather musty bourgeois Catholicism, of which the entire milieu of her family (see the letters, of which still more have recently been published!) and also the quite insignificant convent in which she had to spend the few years of her life bear vivid witness? Can we still endure the flower-strewn boarding-school style in which she wrote her memoirs, to say nothing of the saccharine poems, which in the original language have become unreadable today? And does not this stratum of settled respectability positively invite the psychoanalyst’s scraper to scratch off the all-too-smooth façade of this holiness and expose behind it — one need only think of Thérèse’s puzzling childhood illness! — a whole tangle of complexes? Ida Friederike Görres began this work, and François Six pursues it today far more uninhibitedly. Someone has had the brazenness to say that the Thérèse boom is over for good.

‘Great saints’ are not dependent on publicity, at most on the love of the faithful; and this love arises where there is a sense for the particularity of their mission and the excellence of its execution.

Anyone who takes the trouble to read Thérèse’s authentic writings — the three parts of her autobiography, her letters and poems, the ‘Last Words’ in critical selection and with due caution — without prejudice will be astonished at the freshness, genuineness, indomitable temperament, the will to convince and to carry others along, the intolerance of all that is lukewarm, all resignation, all false humility that immediately meets him — even when Thérèse finds such traits in her priest-friends.

It was not for nothing that Joan of Arc was her favourite saint, with whom she vied in spirit, whose mission she compared with her own, whose role she played with enthusiasm in a theatrical piece, as the surviving photographs attest.

Before we pass to what is properly religious and Christian: I know of no canonised Christian in recent times who possessed such poetic gifts as Thérèse of Lisieux. The images pour from her pen in a constant stream, always original, always hitting the mark. By them she illustrates her teaching on the Little Way, which thereby becomes still more vivid, comprehensible, and attractive. One must certainly be able to set aside time-bound turns of phrase, but this is made easy by the (especially in the letters) welling abundance of ideas. Naturally the 'Great Teresa' is the greater poet, but she writes as a mature, experienced woman, just as her whole activity as foundress of many convents was, humanly speaking, wider in scope than that of the girl who died of consumption barely twenty-five years old. And yet this girl, with all her veneration for the 'Great' one, did not hesitate to lay out the path on Mount Carmel differently, and in doing so, smilingly and often with the slightest touch of malice, to correct a little the two giants of the Carmelite reform — Teresa and John of the Cross. They are two 'eagles' who have soared in mystical flight above the clouds of everyday life and might perhaps lead souls who are not at all called to such flights into false longings and even a ruinous training toward mysticism through the description of their experiences. Little Thérèse knows that the perfection the Gospel intends is accessible to everyone, even if the striving for it always demands the whole commitment of the person.

With this we have reached the point where the particularity of the Theresian 'Little Way' must at least be summarily characterised. Three aspects of her 'teaching' are to be highlighted.

Eternity in the Ever-Present Now

The 'Little Way' is so called because it prescribes attending only to the next step, the one due right now. No high-flying plans for tomorrow, but the little that is asked today, in this hour and minute.

Perhaps to endure an unpleasant person. Perhaps to persevere patiently at a piece of work without cutting it short. Perhaps to bring a prayer to its end from which nothing much seems to be coming. Only today counts, even if the mind would very much like to dream itself into tomorrow. Certainly this today is fleeting; Thérèse feels this piercingly and longs for eternity with God. But now God is nowhere graspable except in the now. The eternity that seems to us to lie in the future is in truth the hidden depth of the present moment. If I fill this moment with Christian love, as far as I am able, to the brim, then I am in contact with the eternal divine Love that accompanies me from moment to moment. It is entirely irrelevant whether what I have to do appears important or unimportant; all that is interesting is how I do it. Here Thérèse's name and motto become significant: she calls herself Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face — both are in her being inseparably united. The child is — as for the

Lord in the Gospel — a guiding image because its moments are concretely filled, because it trusts in the now, bets on love, does not retreat into abstract theories, does not worry about tomorrow, does not hoard and store. But as in the Gospel, the guiding image of the child is inseparable from the guiding image of the Passion: to have to remain thus in the moment, to be nailed fast to it, can already in itself be passion, and becomes this all the more when God fills the believer's moment with traces of redemptive suffering. Thérèse's inner landscape becomes over the years ever more overcast, darker, to the point of experiences of complete aridity, of abandonment, yes of assaults against faith, which she is permitted to experience together with unbelievers and in solidarity with them. And this in each case in a feeling of weakness. A child is not strong. It trusts that it will be carried through. Nor is the sufferer in Gethsemane strong; when he says 'Thy will be done', it is in the trust that the Father's will will carry him through what must appear humanly unbearable.

Love as Unity of Love of God and Love of Neighbour

On the 'Little Way' there is no separation or opposition whatsoever between love of God and love of neighbour. Such a distinction would never have occurred to Thérèse; from earliest youth both are for her the whole, undivided unity of Christian life.

For her it is entirely self-evident that she loves God because he is love, love toward all human beings, toward all sinners, because he — as she says more than once — has gone to the point of madness in this love of humanity. For her, God and eternal life in the abyss of God's love is the whole meaning of creation; therefore she wants to lead as many people as possible to this God, precisely because she loves human beings. She lives in Jesus Christ, who for her is inseparably both the self-giving of God to humanity and the centre of humanity's self-giving to God. In her love of this glowing centre of love between God and the human person, Thérèse discovers her own theological location: in the famous conclusion of the second manuscript she wishes first to embrace all the special charisms in the Church in order to love God and the world from all of them. Then, however, she discovers — in the transition from the twelfth to the thirteenth chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians — that love (inseparably love of God and of neighbour) embraces and surpasses all charisms simultaneously: 'I understood that the Church has a heart and that this heart is burning with love … that love contains all vocations … At last I have found my vocation: it is love!' This sounds effusive, but Thérèse converts the great thought into small everyday currency: in the ever-present now she distributes love to God and to the people she meets; a sister who was inwardly uncongenial to her says with astonishment: 'I have no idea why Thérèse of the Child Jesus is so particularly fond of me …' As a Carmelite Thérèse understands that she cannot give expression to her love through external ecclesial works: her 'work' is the total self-giving of her life, the 'whole burnt offering', which she knows to be the most efficacious, the all-fruitifying action of the Church; she compares herself to the little flywheel that sets all the great wheels of the Church's apostolate in motion. And the Church has on its part acknowledged Thérèse's insight by choosing her as patron of all the missions. She

understands her activity as the product of a perfect selflessness: she wishes to perform no ‘good works’ and to ‘accumulate no merits’, but to radiate everything in advance for the benefit of the world and at the disposal of the Church. And she understands this activity so thoroughly as the definitive disposition of Christian love that even in heaven she wishes to be nothing other than the ‘unpetalled rose’ for God, whose petals are scattered down upon the earth.

A Theology of Hope

This greatest possible openness in the heart of the Church already allows one to sense the third element that characterises the theology of the saint: it is a theology of hope. By pressing on boldly, almost audaciously, from total love to a total hope, she ventures a step into new territory, at least as regards the theology of recent centuries.

She says without circumlocution: ‘One never expects too much from God; one receives from him as much as one has hoped for.’ And therefore: ‘One asks of him exactly as much as one trusts him for.’ But there is nothing that Thérèse would not trust to the love of God. For her, faith (which believes everything God says), love (which seeks to answer his boundless self-giving boundlessly), and hope (which hopes everything from the love of God) are coextensive. She lays claim to a ‘blind hope’ for herself; she also appropriates Paul’s ‘hope against hope’. And since the Son of God died for all sinners by the Father’s commission, and since Thérèse herself understands her mission as that of offering and giving herself for all sinners in the following of Jesus, she does not see why she should be heard only partially and not totally. These bold moves have in Thérèse nothing of a dry knowing-the-answers about God, of a lukewarm opinion that ‘it will all come out right in the end’: the opposite is the case. It is a glowing, if always reverent, throwing-oneself-onto-God’s-heart; it is at the same time an acutely attentive listening for the fundamental note of the Bible, an understanding (without any knowledge of Hebrew) that God’s justice is wholly one with his love.

One needs to pierce a few superficial husks, and one sees with astonishment: Thérèse has answers — and in large measure the answers — to the questions and problems of our present ecclesial moment. The departure she signified does not lie behind us as something done and disposed of.

She has first of all the right answer to the watchword of *orthopraxis*: her little way is nothing other than this. But it lives, as in Christian terms it cannot be otherwise, entirely out of loving faith.

She has the right answer to the falsely posed problem between love of God and love of neighbour, for she shows us that both are in truth one and that each side inevitably points to the other.

She has the right answer to a one-sided and overheated theology of hope, by pointing out hope's true object and sacrificing herself for it with a total existential commitment.

Thérèse is in her life and thought far richer than these few strokes could outline. If one takes her complete work seriously, one is astonished at the fullness and power of what was achieved in so few years. (I have attempted to unfold this richness in *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of Dijon*, 1970.) She is, in the medieval sense of the word, as much a *Lebemeisterin* as a *Lesemeisterin* — a mistress of living as much as of reading. She herself educated novices and was constantly saying and showing them things that were wise, often almost precociously so. She would not demur if we were to ask her to take us into her school.

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